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The Developers Of Front Mission

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Introduction

Front Mission is one of the longest-running and oldest franchises from Square Co., Ltd. dating back to before their merger with Enix Corporation. The franchise has a storied history on the development side of things, from its outsourced roots to the in-house development era. From G-Craft to Square Research & Development (R&D 7) to Square Enix Product Development Division 6 (PDD6), there's a lot to learn about the men and women involved in creating *Front Mission*.

Humble Beginnings: The Masaya Days

Classic cult hits - *Assault Suits Valken* and *Advanced Busterhawk Gleylancer*.

Years before *Front Mission* was conceived, the team of developers who would later be known for creating the franchise were part of Japanese development studio *Masaya*. *Masaya* was well-known for their 2D action and side-scrolling shooter video games, most notably the [Assault Suits](#) series. Most of their games, such as *Advanced Busterhawk Gleylancer*, were never considered for localization and remained in Japan only. The few that did, however, have become cult hits. One of them was *Assault Suits Valken*, or *Cybernator* (as it was renamed by Konami) for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES).

Released in Japan in 1992, *Assault Suits Valken* was a 2D side-scrolling shooter based around the Assault Suits universe. Featuring detailed backgrounds, smooth and fluid action, responsive controls, and a mature storyline (for its time), the game was a sleeper hit that impressed many. The story starred a new Assault Suit pilot as he participates in a war involving territorial rights to the moon and its natural resources. Much of its mature content, such as the graphic suicide of a certain character, were censored in the English localization. This was likely done out of the consideration that video games were considered "child's toys" back then.

From its usage of realistically designed mecha to the political overtones of the storyline, *Assault Suits Valken* would later become one of the blueprints for *Front Mission*. In some ways, the game could be considered as the spiritual predecessor to the franchise.

Coming of Age: The G-Craft Days



A paradigm shift from real-time action to turn-based strategy - *Front Mission* and *Arc the Lad*.

In late 1993, a group of Masaya developers led by Toshiro Tsuchida founded the studio, G-Craft. Rather than continue to work on action-oriented titles, the team ventured into the turn-based strategy realm. This was evident in their newly created intellectual properties, or IPs - *Front Mission* and [Arc the Lad](#). The two share many common elements, from the turn-based gameplay to the fact that both were initially outsourced from Square Co., Ltd. and Sony Computer Entertainment respectively. Both *Front Mission* and *Arc the Lad* also contained serialized stories that were planned in advance, akin to the serial television drama [Lost](#).

However, the two franchises also differ in one major aspect. Whereas *Arc the Lad* was planned as a fantasy-based epic, Tsuchida had a much more ambitious vision for *Front Mission*. Heavily inspired by the real world itself, as well as other works ranging from [Ghost in the Shell](#), [Full Metal Jacket](#), and [Rashomon](#), he set out to create "**a realistic impression of the world's future.**" And so, in early 1994, *Front Mission* was born.

While it would be another year before the game was officially released on the SNES, Tsuchida and his writers began to plot out the series piece by piece. Not content with telling the story through video games alone, Tsuchida intended to have *Front Mission* told through various media. These included books, film, and even radio itself. Much like how a serial drama handles its expanded universe material, all of these mediums would come together to tell the full story.

The release of *Front Mission* for the SNES in February 1995, along with expanded universe supplements released in late 1994, set the saga in motion. Featuring a narrative with mature overtones and disturbing plot material, the video game shocked many players during its time of release. A story of a soldier coping with post-traumatic stress disorder from the death of his fiancee and being blamed for inciting a major war was unheard of. The lack of a true "happy" ending and closure surprised many who thought *Front Mission* would have a traditional Square-styled storyline.

When asked about these details in follow-up interviews, Tsuchida and his team at G-Craft explained that *Front Mission* was designed to present a realistic outlook of the world from all angles. The series visionary also informed Japanese fans about *Front Mission* as a serialized story, as this was only the beginning of the saga. This information intrigued the fans and thereby led to the growth of *Front Mission* in Japan. Square Co., Ltd. was also interested in seeing Toshiro Tsuchida's full vision and began promoting the franchise across various media.

While *Front Mission* captivated the hearts of Square fans, Sony fans were treated to the fantasy-based adventures of a young boy in *Arc the Lad* for the PlayStation. Like *Front Mission*, *Arc the Lad* was well received in Japan and

created a strong following among the fans. Unfortunately, both of these video games were never localized overseas despite plans from Square Co., Ltd. and Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. to do so. Both franchises would continue on with new video game entries in 1996.

Ventures outside the status quo - *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* and *Front Mission 2*.

Released in February 1996 for the SNES, *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* represented a detour for the series, as a 2D side-scrolling shooter similar to *Assault Suits Valken*. The game's story was also unusual in that it took place in a separate universe from the one created for *Front Mission*. Although it was developed by [Omiya Soft](#), many G-Craft developers were also on-board for *Front Mission: Gun Hazard*. Despite the changes, this entry was well received by the fans for its expanded play mechanics (as it was essentially *Assault Suits Valken* in disguise) and strong, mature story.

Arc the Lad II on the PlayStation continued the story of Arc and greatly expanded on the world presented in *Arc the Lad*. Featuring a much longer game with a more developed storyline and improved play mechanics, the game was a major success critically and commercially. *Arc the Lad II* sold nearly one million units in Japan and was one of the highest selling titles during that year. Players praised the game for fixing faults from the original, as well as its more mature overtones similar to ones from *Front Mission*. Its success spawned an [anime](#) as well as a radio drama.

After the release of *Arc the Lad II*, Square Co., Ltd. became interested in buying out G-Craft. The deal was eventually sealed some time during 1997. At the time, G-Craft was developing both *Front Mission 2* and *Front Mission Alternative*. As *Front Mission 2* was nearing completion during the time of the buyout, it was the last game G-Craft was credited for officially. *Front Mission Alternative* would be credited as Square Research & Development 7 (R&D 7) a few months after the release of *Front Mission 2*.

Released in September 1997 on the PlayStation, *Front Mission 2* was a return to turn-based strategy. It was also the first entry to utilize 3D graphics. Featuring a heavier emphasis on politics, the game featured an ensemble cast of characters, depicting their experiences in the midst of a violent revolution in an impoverished country. Mature overtones from the original were expanded upon in many ways, from topics such as colonial dependency. *Front Mission 2* also boasted many new play mechanics, most of which would later be featured in future entries. Despite some accessibility issues, namely long loading times, the game was well received by fans and critics.

Enter Square: The R&D 7 Days

Officially squared - *Front Mission Alternative* and *Front Mission 3*.

As R&D 7, the team released *Front Mission Alternative* in December 1997 on the PlayStation. Like *Front Mission: Gun Hazard*, the game was another genre spin-off, this time as real-time strategy (RTS). While the story was set in the main *Front Mission* universe, it is set farthest away from the timeline. In short, it's a prequel of the things to come in the main storyline. The game was one big experiment, from the play mechanics to the fully realized 3D graphics, and even the music itself. Despite enduring criticism because of these changes, *Front Mission Alternative* is a pivotal entry in that many of its play mechanics are later incorporated into the turn-based entries.

Up to this point, no *Front Mission* video game had received a localization. However, this changed with *Front Mission 3* on the PlayStation. Released in Japan on September 1999, it was also the first game to be localized for North America and Europe. While the game returned to its turn-based strategy roots, it was also a big change from its predecessors. The depth found in previous entries was either removed or downgraded in exchange for user accessibility. Likewise, the story was written to be more palatable to a younger audience. While newcomers enjoyed the game as a result, *Front Mission 3* was seen as a regression by series veterans.

Beyond the two *Front Mission* titles, the team's days as R&D 7 were short-lived. Due to the upcoming release of [Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within](#) and implementation of [PlayOnline](#), developers from the company's internal teams were laid off. This, however, did not stop R&D 7 from further trying to expand the franchise.

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Part Two

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Ring of Red: The Konami Days

A temporary detour - Ring of Red.

Most R&D 7 employees found work through Konami after being laid off and in September 2000, [Ring of Red](#) was released on the PlayStation 2. Following the same route as the *Front Mission* spin-offs, the game was a blend of turn-based and real-time strategy. While the player could move around maps in turns, battles played out in real-time. Despite the low-budget appearance, it was praised for its play mechanics and was essentially a *Front Mission* entry all but in name. A major criticism was its localization; players could find grammar mistakes in the game. The story was also partially censored during localization for unknown reasons.

Front Mission Project: The PDD6 Days

The Front Mission Project logo.

New missions - *Front Mission First*, a remake of *Front Mission*, and *Front Mission 4*.

When Square Co., Ltd. merged with Enix Corporation, the company decided to re-hire many of the employees it laid off. Many of the R&D 7 employees who went to Konami were re-hired to form PDD6, though some stayed behind, presumably to help develop the [Zone of the Enders](#) franchise. With the original team re-assembled and Tsuchida back at the helm, he set forth to complete the plans he laid out in 1994. And so, the [Front Mission Project](#) was born. After unveiling the project to the public at the [Tokyo Game Show 2003](#), two titles were announced: *Front Mission First* for the PlayStation and *Front Mission 4* for the PlayStation 2.

Reminding the Japanese audience about the series' serialized nature, Tsuchida explained that *Front Mission First* was a remake of the original. A new campaign was being developed to help explain the mysteries behind the original campaign, as well as introduce plot linkages to *Front Mission 4*. To help newcomers catch up on the series, a compilation titled *Front Mission History* was announced. It would be made up of *Front Mission First*, a modified *Front Mission 2* with faster loading times and battle skipping options, and *Front Mission 3*. This and the standalone *Front Mission First* were released weeks before *Front Mission 4* during Fall 2003.

After over 3 years since the last entry, *Front Mission 4* was released in December 2003. As with *Front Mission 3*, the game was also localized overseas. Although the return to the *Front Mission* norm was accepted by fans, it was also criticized for feeling "incomplete". The story felt rushed at times, many of the parts that were coded into the game went unused, and it had very little in the way of side modes and replay factor. There were even features that weren't officially documented in the game, such as [four new battle simulations](#) in the North American release. These criticisms were acknowledged by PDD6 in follow-up interviews.

The Front Mission Mobile entries - *Front Mission 2089* and *Front Mission 2089-II*.

Aware of their shortcomings, PDD6 went back to the drawing board and began work on their next *Front Mission* entries. Having realized the growth of mobile phone gaming in Japan, PDD6 created the [Front Mission Mobile](#) series. The development of the series was outsourced to *MSF* and *Winds*. (though numerous PDD6 developers were involved, similar to the situation with *Front Mission: Gun Hazard*) The first title, *Front Mission 2089*, was released on March 2005 for the mobile

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phones. While the game played the same as *Front Mission First*, the story was told through episodes. On a bi-weekly basis, new episodes could be downloaded onto the mobile phones.

As the *Front Mission Mobile* series took off, PDD6 began beta testing for their newest spin-off: *Front Mission: Online*. Designed as a massively-multiplayer online (MMO) game in the third-person shooter (TPS) genre, this marked the first time the series ventured into online gaming. Through this, Square Enix Co., Ltd. gave North American people a chance to test the game months prior to its release on May 2005 on the PlayStation 2, and on December 2005 on Windows PC. Much to these testers' chagrin, the company did not localize and release *Front Mission: Online* overseas. Service of the game on PlayOnline ended on May 31, 2008.

Grandiose redefined - *Front Mission: Online* and *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War*.

While developing the *Front Mission Mobile* and *Front Mission: Online* projects, PDD6 kept their eye on the biggest project - *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War*. After many *Front Mission* video games and expanded universe supplements, the goal Tsuchida and his team had been working so hard for was now within their grasp. Nothing short of excellence would be acceptable for the finale of a grand saga. And thankfully, they did not disappoint. Well aware of all of the praises and criticisms of past entries, PDD6 crafted a new turn-based entry that maximized the former elements and minimized the latter. Amazingly, all of the previous entries gets a nod from this entry.

Released at the very end of December in 2005 on the PlayStation 2, *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War* was a fitting gift to the fans who stuck through since the beginning. Starring the cast first introduced in the *Front Mission Zero* manga in 1994, closure was a key theme in the storyline. The unresolved plot elements from past entries were finally brought to their conclusion as the story unfolded. Most importantly, *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War* brought closure to the intertwined lives of the series' main protagonist and deuteragonist. While these two characters were the most frequently recurring characters from the *Front Mission* books, they had only made minor appearances in the video games until now.

When *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War* was released, a huge sigh of relief from PDD6 could be felt in their old development blog (which is now unfortunately out of service). Many developers, especially from the original *Front Mission* team, wrote lengthy posts expressing their thoughts on the 11-year journey, how big the series became, and thanking all the fans who supported them. This feeling of success was evident in the critical and commercial response to the game. *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War* received universal praise from industry reviews, and it sold well enough that the franchise as a whole broke the 3 million units sold mark.

Mission Complete: Moving onto New Frontiers

With their original goal finally met, PDD6 no longer needed to continue working on *Front Mission*. They could have easily created a new IP if they wanted to. Yet, the team chose to continue expanding the franchise...but not in the usual means. On the video game front, *Front Mission 2089-II* was co-developed by PDD6, MSF, and Winds. Released in 2006 and designed as a follow-up to the original *Front Mission 2089*, it focused on exploring the previously unexplained mysteries behind that video game's story. The play mechanics were also changed; instead of resembling *Front Mission First*, the game plays closer to *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War*.

The Nintendo DS frontiers - *Front Mission First* and *Front Mission 2089: Border of Madness*.

A few months later, using the leftover funding from the *Front Mission Project*, PDD6 decided to port over *Front Mission First* to the Nintendo DS. Released in March 2007, the game added a lot of new content, such as new parts, weapons, and secret missions. In a move to bridge the gap between the *Front Mission* video games and books, characters from various entries were added in the game's campaigns. It is this version that finally sees a localization overseas, thanks to some **persuasive arguments** the PDD6 developers made with the company's head office. While this was their first time working on the DS, it would not be the last.

Noticing from survey research that fans would rather play a *Front Mission* video game on a portable system than mobile phones, PDD6 decided to create a remake based on *Front Mission 2089* and to an extent, *Front Mission 2089-II*. The remake, *Front Mission 2089: Border of Madness*, was released on the Nintendo DS on May 2008. The game was modeled after *Front Mission First* with the inclusion of features from other entries, namely the ability to coordinate linked attacks. Despite the lack of new play mechanics, *Front Mission 2089: Border of Madness* presents the story using manga-styled drawings as a nod to the *Front Mission* manga. The game has not been localized overseas sadly.

Video games aside, PDD6 has been involved in the spreading *Front Mission* to other media. Most notably through the print medium, in the form of manga and novels. Although the team has been releasing *Front Mission* books since 1994 and have found much success in this medium, it was not until 2005 that they began to truly create a second "home" out of it. Through a partnership with **Young Gangan** in 2005, two original *Front Mission* entities were born: *Front Mission - The Drive* in

2005 and *Front Mission - Dog Life & Dog Style* in 2007. *Front Mission - The Drive* has already concluded, but *Front Mission - Dog Life & Dog Style* is still on-going.

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Part Three

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The Future: What's Next?

Video Games

A radical new experiment - Front Mission Evolved.

Nearly five years have passed since the release of *Front Mission 5: Scars of the War*...and the franchise is still alive. While PDD6 has not registered much activity, likely due to commitments to help develop the new *Final Fantasy* titles, but there's no telling where they will go from here on. A new entry, *Front Mission Evolved*, which was recently released in Fall 2010 but development was outsourced to **Double Helix Games** and other companies. This decision came under heavy criticism from long-time fans of the series. Beyond this, Koichiro Sakamoto from PDD6 mentioned that **there is a chance of the series returning to its turn-based strategy roots**. Can the franchise keep going in the video game realm?

Manga & Novels



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The PDD6 writers are proving their mastery of the writing craft with their work on *Front Mission - Dog Life & Dog Style*, the current *Front Mission* manga series...and one that shows no signs of ending soon. Given the financial successes of the previous book series, *Front Mission* could make a living in this medium should no more video games be produced in the future. The only question is if any of them will be translated and released outside of Japan...it's a shame none have made it overseas. Apart from their plot connections, the *Front Mission* books also boast a level of writing on par with well-known fiction novels (which should come as no surprise the PDD6 writers are novelists themselves).

Other Possibilities

Star power - the live-action films, *Front Mission* and *Front Mission: Gun Hazard*.

Apart from video games and books, *Front Mission* could see more expansion in the areas of film and radio. The franchise has had past experiences in live-action film through *Front Mission* in 1994 and *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* in 1995. Creating something like an original video animation (OVA) wouldn't be out of the question as PDD6 has developers (particularly their writers) with film industry credentials. The *Front Mission: Gun Hazard* radio drama in late 1995 was popular, but radio is not necessarily a popular medium for drama these days. Nevertheless, as radios are still in use, who knows?

Conclusion

Front Mission is an unusual beast...a real one of a kind. It's a video game franchise, but it also utilizes various other media effectively to create a bigger picture. In fact, it seems as if video games aren't necessarily needed to tell the *Front Mission* story. The series has its roots in the turn-based strategy genre of video games, but more often than not it has been open to experimentation and ventures into other realms. It's a well-known and respected series in Japan, but sadly almost a complete mystery in the rest of the world.

And the craziest fact is, the series was created by a group of developers whose portfolio was comprised of nothing but action-oriented games. Despite this, they not only managed to make a successful transition to a completely different genre, but did not abandon their roots, continuing to innovate with their genre-bending efforts. What are the odds?

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